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SHALL THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS BE TAKEN  
LITERALLY?

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There are marked signs in our times of a tendency toward practicality in the expression of religion. The devotional ecstasy of one hundred years ago which had to do with the emotions, the doctrinal controversies of fifty years ago which concerned themselves with the intellect, are taking a secondary position, and men are coming to feel that religion is obedience to the teachings of Jesus Christ. Such books as James and Proverbs, and above all the Sermon on the Mount, are daily growing in the esteem of Christians. Religion is no longer introspective, but extra-active.

During the past generations of debate and devotion, the teachings of Jesus have not been emphasized, or rather they have been studied and stated in the light of preconceived social principles. These teachings concern themselves chiefly with the practical expression of the religious life. Jesus will not have cant or hypocrisy, but *action*: "Why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" "Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me." "If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments." These commandments, which he who loves Jesus will keep, relate mainly to our attitude toward those who need help. They are exemplified in the life of Jesus himself, who was regarded as a companion of drunkards and harlots, who lived a life of poverty, and suffered the fate of a criminal. They are summed up in such sayings as these: "He that would be first among you, let him be servant of all," and "He that would save his life shall lose it."

In order to discuss intelligently the question at the beginning of this article, let us first group and examine some of the most striking of Jesus' sayings.

## I. PASSAGES RELATING TO POVERTY.

1. "Blessed are ye poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God," Luke 6 : 20.
2. "Sell that ye have, and give alms," Luke 12 : 33.
3. "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon the earth," Matt. 6 : 19.

## II. RESISTANCE OF PHYSICAL INJURY.

"Resist not him that is evil ; but whosoever smiteth thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also," Matt. 5 : 39.

## III. CHARITY.

"Give to every one that asketh thee," Luke 6 : 30.

## IV. THEFT AND BURGLARY.

1. "Of him that taketh away thy goods, ask them not again," Luke 6 : 30.
2. "From him that taketh away thy cloak, withhold not thy coat also," Luke 6 : 29 ; or,
3. "If any man would go to law with thee, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also," Matt. 5 : 40.

## V. LOANS.

1. "From him that would borrow of thee, turn not thou away," Matt. 5 : 42.
2. "Lend, never despairing," Luke 6 : 35.
3. "If ye lend to them of whom ye hope to receive, what thank have ye?" Luke 6 : 34.

## VI. SOCIAL RELATIONS.

1. "When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, nor thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbors ; lest haply they also bid thee again, and a recompense be made thee. But when thou makest a feast, bid the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, because they have not wherewith to recompense thee," Luke 14 : 12-14.

2. "Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you," Luke 6 : 26.

What sort of living would a literal interpretation of these words involve? Let us look at the passages quoted in order.

I. *Attitude toward Property.* (1) It looks, both from Jesus' own example, and from these commands, as if his followers were expected to lead a life of poverty. Jesus had not where to lay his head. He went to a fish to get money to pay his own and his disciple's tax. In using an illustration requiring a coin, he borrowed the coin. He left his mother, at his death, in John's care, though we are not informed that it was because he had left nothing for her support. (2) He commands his disciples to sell their possessions, and give away the proceeds. The case of the rich young man is an example of individual application of this general command. Peter says to the lame man at the temple-gate, "Silver and gold have I none." The book of Acts shows us these principles in practice. (3) Jesus seems to forbid a bank-account.

II. *Attitude toward Physical Assault.* The command is explicit not to resist a man that is evil. We are expected, not only not to strike back, but to offer ourselves undefended for further attack.

III. *Attitude towards Questions of Charity.* Indiscriminate charity is commanded.

IV. *Attitude toward Theft, Burglary and Lawsuit.* (1) The disciple of Jesus is to offer no resistance to thieves. (2) He is to make no effort to recover stolen property—not even to ask for it. (3) He is to give more than is demanded. (4) He is not to engage in a suit at law to recover his property.

V. *Attitude toward Loaning Money.* (1) He is to lend to every one who asks him. (2) And he is to do so even when he is confident that he shall never be paid.

VI. *Attitude as Regards Social Position.* (1) He is to make dinners for the poor and physically unattractive. (2) Widespread popularity, so far from being an object to be sought after, is rather a curse.

So much, then, for exegesis. What would be the material results of such a life? Jesus has left this question unanswered, as not being of sufficient importance; but it is not hard to answer. Until such a life becomes universal among men, or until the individual who lives it becomes universally known, he will of course be imposed upon. As long as his property lasts, it will be borrowed, begged or stolen. But the command to give it away will also reduce its owner to poverty. Being poor, he will dress like the poor, live in the poor quarter, and his companions will be poor. He will be despised by many of his friends, pitied by some and treated with social contempt by others. He will encounter persecution.

If such are the results of his sayings, what purpose could Jesus have had in view in uttering them? (1) It is clear that he regards earthly possessions as having no essential value. His purpose everywhere is to lead men away from these things to the spiritual. (2) He would put the responsibility where it belongs. If a man comes to kill me, and I kill him, I do not relieve his heart of his criminal intent, and I take the crime upon my own shoulders. If a man asks my money, I am not responsible for what he does with it, and I do not

cure his love of drink by refusing him money. I rather strengthen the distrust and hatred of his fellows, which already exists in his breast. (3) Jesus would win men by love. He knew that physical violence, or external restraint, would not melt a sinful heart. Chaining the body will not release the soul. If love will not conquer, nothing will. "God sendeth his rain upon the just and upon the unjust." (4) The example of such a life would influence the rich to a course of self-sacrifice, far sooner than becoming rich one's self, which latter life strengthens in them the impression that money is worth more than sacrifice. (5) Such a scheme as this can be, in most of its details, only temporary. When all are Christians, all may acquire beautiful material surroundings, and through the beauty of God's works see the beauty of him who made them. But the day is not come yet when our neighbors do not need bread for their mouths and the Bread of Life for their souls more than we need the advantages of material prosperity.

The above discussion brings us face to face with the dilemma of the average Christian life. I never met a man who practiced a tithe of these teachings. Therefore, either they should not be taken literally, or the professed disciples of Jesus follow neither Jesus nor the teachings of Jesus. Of course the *spirit* of these teachings is the law of self-sacrificing love. But is not the spirit always more comprehensive than the letter, instead of being less so? If these teachings were literally practiced, would there not be more significance in becoming a disciple of Jesus?